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How to cite this manuscript

If you make reference to this version of the manuscript, use the following information:

Burrack, F. (2009). How to make rehearsals more effective. Retrieved from <http://krex.ksu.edu>

Published Version Information

Citation: Burrack, F. (2009). How to make rehearsals more effective. Keynotes Magazine. Retrieved from <http://www.keynotesmagazine.com/article/?uid=254>

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Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

Publisher's Link: <http://www.keynotesmagazine.com/article/?uid=254>

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How to Make Rehearsals More Effective

Dr. Frederick Burrack

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Interestingly the first area on which to focus in making rehearsals more effective does not coincided with the rehearsal itself. It is in planning. Many have bought into the fallacy that effective rehearsals are a result of spontaneous interaction with immediate student performance so knowing the score is the only planning necessary. Too often music teachers wait to hear mistakes made in rehearsal followed by instructions on how these mistakes are to be eliminated. The result is students who leave rehearsal with slightly enhanced skills and virtually the same knowledge with which they entered.

PLANNING: Although a thorough knowledge of the score is essential, this alone does not secure sufficient preparation for a truly effective rehearsal. It is imperative to decide in advance of the rehearsal what you want the students to learn with the intent of building upon what they already know and understand. Each lesson that is planned should have predetermined students' learning objectives focused upon enhancing skills specific to the literature studied, knowledge that will help students make quality decisions in performance, and an aesthetic focus to stimulate a meaningful relationship with the music. Leaving these areas up to chance through spontaneous interaction, although possibly leaving students with a feeling of immediate success, does not provide sufficient foundation for the enhanced knowledge and conscious control of skills that will provide a foundation for future student decision-making that results in consistently effective rehearsals.

WARM-UP: Warm-ups need to be planned with as much attentiveness to specific learning outcomes of the rehearsal as does the rehearsal itself. Select the concept and associated skills to be focused upon in the warm-up from the challenges that will be addressed later in the rehearsal. These challenges can be incorporated into scales, chorales, and diction or intonation exercises. Equally important for effective rehearsals is a transparency of focus to the students. Let the students know the purpose of the warm-up so their learning can be transferred directly into the first piece rehearsed.

THE REHEARSAL: One of the protocols that result from spontaneous teaching is often a director led rehearsal in which the students are told how to make improvements as the rehearsal progresses. Although this strategy appears to have immediate impact upon musical enhancement, what it lacks in effectiveness is the development of students' musical problem solving, an essential aspect of independent musicianship. Instead of telling students how to fix problem areas, find ways of leading students through the analytical process to develop critical listening skills and diagnostic processes. Based upon psychological studies and learning theory developed over the 20th century of educational research, the following is an instructional sequence that will provide a foundation for effective rehearsals that lead to student learning and independent musicianship:

1. Elicit prior knowledge: The brain learns by comparing and connecting new knowledge and experiences to prior knowledge/skill. Essential is student recognition of prior knowledge upon which new knowledge/skill is to be compared. Since children often live and think in the present, we as teachers should assist students' learning by reminding them of what they know and can do. Too often music teachers begin teaching a new concept or skill without taking the time to recall the context upon which the learning is associated. Starting an instructional sequence by playing/singing through a section or discussing the context before the new skill/knowledge is taught can accomplish this.

2. Teaching new concepts or skills: Since learning occurs by the brain comparing new knowledge and experience with prior knowledge, it is important for the students to recognize that a problem exists between the new expectation and their former skill/understanding. The mind works on a need-to-know basis. Until there is recognition of disconnect between desired achievements and present knowledge/skills, much of what is taught simply goes in one ear and out the other. It is the process of discovery that leads students to this recognition. Instead of telling the students what to do or learn, plan instructional strategies that will expose the need for further improvement. It doesn't matter that we, as teachers, know what improvements are needed in rehearsal if the students are not aware of them.

3. Making improvements: It is at the point of student recognition of the need-to-learn that effective learning occurs. At this point we have a choice, either tell the students how to make the improvement, which involves limited intellectual activity in this form of response to direction, or lead students through problem solving experiences through which they make musical decisions. The first may be more efficient but the second is more effective for developing musicianship.

4. Recognition of achievement: At this point we often tell students "Good job" and move on to the next objective. Missing is the students' identification of achievement, an important step of the learning process. An incorrect assumption is that students automatically recognize learning/achievement. When students are led through a decision-making process of identifying and qualifying their level of achievement, then the possibility of moving the learning from short-term to long-term memory is enhanced.

5. Place learning back into context: There is one more step for a complete instructional sequence. Each rehearsal segment is often isolated from the musical whole. For learning to transfer into long-term musicianship, students must experience their new learning back into the musical context. When we move to a new learning experience before we allow the students to unite newly learned concepts or skills into context, we eliminate an essential component of repetition and application.

A few other ideas that contribute to effective rehearsals include:

* Teach one thing at a time. When we stop an ensemble and state a list of needed improvements, the students will only recall one or two of these expectations when they return to the rehearsal performance. Although it may seem less efficient, rehearsals become much more effective if you guide the students to focus on one learning expectation at a time.

* When students achieve success, reinforce these achievements with specific feedback rather than a generic “good job”. Unspecified praise is like crying wolf. If overused or is not tied to specific achievement, it soon means nothing. Specify what was good, which also provides you with the opportunity to expose the next improvement need.

* When studying in college you often are told not to listen to a recording until you have developed your own musical sense of the composition. This is appropriate for a college student because there is a foundation upon which you can make your decisions, but the suggestion is far from appropriate for middle or high school students. They have not yet established a foundation of knowledge or experience from which to draw. Play the recording or a variety of recordings early in the rehearsal process. Students need a reference upon which to compare their musical experiences and learning.

* Repetition is essential to student learning but is most effective when offered through a variation of techniques. For example: sing, finger on instruments, clap rhythms, using visual aides, listening, etc. But one of the most effective tools for instrumental teachers is singing. **INCLUDE SINGING IN EVERY REHEARSAL!**

* Don’t waste time stopping a rehearsal to tell the students how to make improvements if you can teach through your conducting gestures. Aspects such as style, volume, tempo, etc. Talking about musical needs is probably the most ineffective way of communicating an aural art.

* Providing multiple ways of experiences music is very important and makes rehearsals more interesting, as suggested in the National Standards. One mistake that is often made when providing such experiences is isolating them within the rehearsal. It is more effective to integrate historical, cultural, and biographical elements, or other experiences that can enhance students’ relationship with the music, into the rehearsal of pieces rather than interjected between rehearsal segments. Students will learn more profoundly when these learnings are directly connected to the musical performance.

Dr. Frederick Burrack is the Associate Professor of Music Education and Director of Graduate Studies in Music at Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas. Dr. Burrack holds a Bachelor of Music Education degree from Wartburg College in Waverly, Iowa and a Master of Music Education degree from Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. The Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis in Music Education was received from the University of Illinois-Urbana. Prior to Kansas State, Dr. Burrack taught instrumental music education at Ball State University from 2002-2005 and instrumental music in the Carroll Community School District in Carroll, Iowa from 1982-2002. At Carroll High School he initiated student self-assessment and portfolio development into the performance program.

Dr. Burrack’s research interests include alternative assessment methods, cross-disciplinary instruction, and problem solving in music teaching. He has presented lectures at the Iowa, Indiana, Tennessee, and Illinois Music Education Association state conferences, the National Music Educators Conference, Iowa Bandmasters Conference, Iowa Mobile In-Service Training Lab, state and regional Supervision and Curriculum Conferences, and the College Music Society national and regional conferences. Dr. Burrack is an adjudicator, clinician, and guest conductor

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